DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 437 CE 072 559

AUTHOR Burkhart, Jennifer
TITLE Understanding Organizational Culture.
INSTITUTION Colorado State Dept. of Education, Denver. State Library and Adult Education Office.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 13p.; For related documents, see CE 072 551-559.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Corporate Education; *Educational Environment; *Industrial Training; Influences; *Organizational Communication; *Organizational Development; *Organizational Objectives; *Workplace Literacy
IDENTIFIERS 353 Project; *Organizational Culture

ABSTRACT

This guide, which is intended for workplace education providers, defines organizational culture, reviews selected techniques for reading a company's culture, and presents examples of ways in which organizations' culture can affect workplace education programs. An organization's culture is determined by: recognizing the company's philosophy (including the company's values/beliefs and quality philosophy); recognizing company-employee relations; appreciating the company's history (by observing employee orientation sessions, listening to stories of company heroes, and observing company customs/rites/rituals); understanding company language; observing the company's dress code; acknowledging the company's environment; reviewing printed materials to determine how the company sees itself; appreciating how the company values and uses time; and identifying career paths and advancement opportunities in the company. Contains a list of eight resources. (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CE

ED 399 437

Understanding Organizational Culture

cde

COLORADO DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

COLORADO STATE LIBRARY
AND ADULT EDUCATION OFFICE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J M Schubert

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CE 072 559

Understanding Organizational Culture

1995

Jennifer Burkhart
Consultant, Workplace Education
Office of Adult Education

Funded by
The Adult Education Act 100-297 Section 353
Administered through
The Colorado Department of Education
State Library and Adult Education Office

Office of Adult Education
Colorado Department of Education
201 E. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80203-1799

Colorado State Board of Education
Patricia M. Hayes, Chairman, Englewood
Thomas Howerton, Vice Chairman, Colorado Springs
John Evans, Parker
Royce D. Forsyth, Denver
Patti Johnson, Broomfield
Clair Orr, Kersey
Hazel F. Petrocco, Pueblo

Commissioner of Education
Dr. William T. Randall
State of Colorado

Nancy Bolt, Assistant Commissioner
State Library and Adult Education Office

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Definition	1
Determining Organizational Culture	2
Recognizing Company Philosophy	2
Recognizing Company/Employee Relations	3
Appreciating Company History	3
Understanding Company Language	4
Observing Dress Codes	4
Acknowledging Company Environment	5
Reviewing Print Materials	5
Appreciating Time	5
Understanding Career Paths	6
Bibliography	7
Resources	7
Notes	8

Understanding Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has major implications for workplace education providers. A company's culture will impact the workplace program from the first company contact through the final program evaluation. It will provide the educational partner with clues as to which company to target, how to approach a company, what a company expects from outside consultants, how to conduct business in a company, what is valued by a company, how to structure the workplace education program and each of its components based upon the culture, and much more.

Because of the implications organizational culture has on your workplace education program, it is important to understand what organizational culture is and how to read it. This guide will define organizational culture, review some ways to read a company's culture, and give examples of how organizational culture can affect your workplace education program.

What is organizational culture?

Ronald B. Adler (1989) defined organizational culture in his book, Communicating at Work, as:

> *...a relatively stable picture of the organization's personality shared by its members. Cultures are usually shaped in the organization's early days, often by its earliest leaders. Everyday customs and rituals both reflect the culture and continue to shape it. (p. 40)*

S.P. Robbins (1984) in Essentials of Organizational Behavior describes organizational culture as *"the way things are around here"*. (p. 171)

Although different in approach, both statements are effective in defining organizational culture as seen in behaviors exhibited in a company. In developing workplace education partnerships understanding the definition of organizational culture is not as important as knowing how to read a company's culture. After all, understanding each company's culture will provide the important factors that will assist you in defining *how you will do things around there*.

Learning about a company's culture is a continuous process in that cultures change as organizations and functions change. The following section will focus on where to look and how to read the day-to-day observations of an organization and the significance of these observations to your workplace education program.

How do you determine an organization's culture?

Recognize Company Philosophy:

Values and Beliefs

Most organizations have a set of values and beliefs that drives company actions. These values and beliefs provide employees common direction or standards on which to base their actions and behaviors. For example, it is probable that employees will submit innovative ideas more readily to management in a company that values employee suggestions as opposed to a company that does not. Similarly, these values and beliefs will provide outside consultants with clues as to how to conduct business with the organization.

These values are often expressed in the company's written materials such as annual reports, marketing materials, product information brochures, posted mission statements, company newsletters, etc. Request these items from company receptionists, marketing personnel, community and/or investor relations people, and be aware of posted statements in lobbies, conference rooms, lunch rooms, etc.

Quality Philosophy

Organizations that are implementing a quality program usually have a quality philosophy that is adopted and driven through the organization. This is usually a major factor in the development of organizational culture because it is a philosophy from which the employees base their actions. Quality statements, like mission statements are often posted throughout the company or are present in written materials. Like values and beliefs, quality philosophies can provide clues as to what is acceptable behavior and what quality measures an outside consultant could incorporate in the workplace education program. For example, if a company's quality philosophy includes quality satisfaction measures for internal customers as well as external customers, the outside consultant should provide quality satisfaction measures for the participants of the workplace education program. These satisfaction measures may be developed and utilized in addition to the quality standards already employed by the workplace education provider. For more information on workplace education program evaluation, please see the guide in this series, ***Evaluating Workplace Education Program Effectiveness.***

Recognize Company / Employee Relations:

Organizational culture may be read in how an organization treats employees, vendors and others associated with the organization. To read these relations, on might rate them on a spectrum with the following three points:

- adversarial, conflict-based
- average, neither negative nor empowering
- partnering, empowering, team-based

To identify where a company falls along this spectrum, observe employees' actions in how they respond to you, each other, supervisors, etc. These observations may give you an indication of acceptable behaviors. For example, if employees appear comfortable in addressing managers on a first name basis, the workplace education provider may decide to conduct business on a first name basis. Conducting business in a manner that is acceptable or common place in the company will promote good company / workplace education provider relations.

Appreciate Company History:

There are many ways to learn about a company's history. Much of this history will be obtained through conversations with employees and other company representatives. The following describes ways in which you can learn about the company's history.

- **Employee Orientation**

  Generally new hires are given some type of orientation training. This orientation might be formal (complete with written information) or more informal (relying on verbal instruction or history). Asking the company contact about new hire orientation might provide insights into the company history, expectations, procedures, etc.

- **Heroes and Stories**

  Frequently, companies will refer to important figures in their history. These individuals might be the founding fathers of the company or an outstanding employee. These individuals are usually held in high regard and the stories surrounding them are often recited to inspire or motivate employees. Listen to what is passed on by employees and management, what is held in high regard, and what is ridiculed.

- **Customs, Rites and Rituals**

  A company's customs, rites and rituals reflect the organizational culture because they reflect what is important to that company. For example, a company may celebrate employee promotions, provide incentives for continuing education, and/or honor an outstanding employee every month. Each of these activities provides the workplace education consultant with information about what is valued in the company.

Understand the Language:

Good communication is a cornerstone in effective partnerships. Miscommunication can cost consultants contracts and damage good program reputations. Taking time to learn and understand a company's language will create a base for effective communication and partnerships. Each organization develops and uses its own vocabulary, acronyms and/or even language. Observing and assimilating the language into your own communication with the company will facilitate the formation and operation of the workplace education program. Listen for new words and expressions in the written material you acquire. Use active listening techniques, ask questions, and restate what is said to check for clear understanding and comprehension.

Observe the Dress Code:

Dress codes can tell quite a bit about how an organization operates. Generally, more formal dress requirements denote more formal methods of operation while informal dress requirements generally denote a less formal structure of operation. Additionally, a company's values may be seen in the dress of employees. Contrast between the dress of employees and management might provide insight to the organizational structure. For example, if casual wear is the norm for both employees and management, a consultant might find that the company operates under a flattened structure versus a formal hierarchial structure. **It is important to note that every company is different, and impressions based upon this type of observance can often be erroneous.**

Acknowledge the Environment:

Like dress, a company's environment can tell a lot about how it operates. Consultants might observe a structured divided space allocation or one that is less formal and open. For example, at IBM there is a corresponding amount of square footage assigned to each position level. Every effort is made to keep position and square footage equal. In this example, space allocation directly relates to the perceived value of the employee's position. Observing space allocation for the workplace education class is an important consideration for educational consultants. It is important to stress the need for a space conducive to learning.

Review Printed Material:

Printed materials often provide a picture of how a company sees itself. This image or self-assessment is usually correct, however it may not provide the entire picture. Observing the written material's layout, content and art work will give consultants a chance to read the image that the company chooses to project. Again, ask company representatives to send annual reports, quarterly reviews, marketing brochures, company newsletters, etc. In addition to company materials, news articles and other materials from outside sources can assist in providing the rest of the picture not provided in company literature.

Appreciate Time:

Clues to company culture may be observed in the way it values and uses time. Simple observations such as the presence of time clocks, the number of shifts, or the opportunities for flex-time can tell a consultant about its mode of operation. For example, a company that provides opportunities for flex-time might be seen as a company that values and accommodates individual schedules. Observe the employees. How do they use their time? Do they schedule their own work load? Do employees use time efficiently in discussions? Do meetings start and end on time? Will the company provide release time for classes? Answering these questions will assist consultants in providing classes at appropriate times for employees and the company.

Understand Career Paths:

Another cultural clue can be found in the advancement opportunities employees have in the company. Determining the background of management will give consultants clues as to who will most likely have the best advancement opportunities. Knowing advancement opportunities will also provide valuable information about what the expected outcomes of the educational program are. Are the outcomes tied to employees' advancement opportunities, improved performance in current positions, and/or management structural changes? Are the classes tied to other training opportunities? Answers to these questions in conjunction with employee and company needs assessments can provide direction to the workplace education program.

Conclusions

Because each organization or company has a unique culture, or style of operation, being mindful of the clues listed in this guide will assist in working with that organization. It is important to note that if an educational consultant does not know what an organization's culture is, the best approach is a formal one. Once the cultural clues have been observed, consultants can modify their approaches to work within the acceptable guidelines of the company. Consultants might change their communication techniques, meetings, planning, decision making, etc. based upon their observations. As a consultant it is important to remain consistent with the program's culture and methods of operation. Matching strengths and values with those of the company will facilitate the development and implementation of the workplace education program.

For more information or assistance in the development of workplace education programs, please call:

Jennifer Burkhart
Workplace Education Consultant
(303) 866-6936

Bibliography

Adler, Ronald B. (1989) Communicating at Work Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions 2nd ed. New York, NY: Random House

Robbins, S.P. (1984) Essentials of Organizational Behavior. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Resources

Adler, Ronald B. (1989) Communicating at Work Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions 2nd ed. New York, NY: Random House

Deal, T.E. and A.A. Kennedy (1982). Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley

Goldhaber, G. (1986) Organizational Communication 4th ed. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown

Katz, D. and R. Kahn (1978) The Social Psychology of Organizations 2nd ed. New York, NY: John Wiley

Peters, T.J. and R. H. Waterman, J., (1982) In Search of Excellence. New York, NY: Harper & Row

Robbins, S.P. (1984) Essentials of Organizational Behavior. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Notes:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE